

Shopping for Spices Is an Enticing Experience

BY JAMES A. BEARD with JOSE WILSON

I have always been an inveterate shopper. I love to snoop around markets, to haunt shops that carry offbeat foods. One of my great favorites is Haig's on Clement St. in a section of San Francisco with Middle Eastern shops, Chinese stores that have moved out from Chinatown, and two or three Russian shops. With its food and gift shops and restaurants, this is a very colorful street, yet oddly enough it is pretty well undiscovered by tourists. If you, too, are a snooper, you'll find it a good hour's worth of fun.

Recently, while giving classes in San Francisco, I went to Haig's with a friend to buy herbs and spices. We must have spent an hour going over the shelves, discussing things with the owners and having a wonderful, nostalgic time. This shop has probably the largest collection of chutneys I've seen anywhere—lime, lemon, mango and lots of others, in sizes from half-pints to gallons. I spotted varieties of chutney that I thought had disappeared in this country and could hardly resist toting home a great pile of them. Then there are all kinds of exotic canned fruits called for in Indian, Chinese, Japanese and other recipes, including mangoes in four or five different versions. I have, in the past, used these fruits to make delicious sorbets and ice creams.

Variety of Spices

The variety of spices, most of them whole, is nothing short of sensational. There are many different types of paprikas; whole, ground and crumbled chiles; whole grains; tapioca, the whole, not the ground type; a spectacular selection of olive oils, mostly Greek (the oil made from calamata olives is particularly desirable); a mouth-watering collection of ripe and green olives of all types; the best pistachio nuts I have ever found and lovely things like halva and various Oriental pastries. If you are a baker, you'll find interesting pans for desserts such as baklava, useful not only for the purpose for which they were designed but also for Western baking.

I bought whole and ground spices for an Indian dish we were making in class, the quality of which depends on the flavor of freshly ground spices in the hot, curry-like sauce. I'm going to give you my mixture, which you can blend according to your own taste of hotness and spiciness and use in different dishes instead of curry powder. The secret of grinding your own spices is to use a small electric coffee mill, but as we didn't have one on hand I put the spices in the food processor and then, as the result was not quite fine enough, finished them off with a good pounding in a mortar and pestle.

For the spice mixture, which is like the

garam masala of Indian cuisine, put 1 tablespoon whole coriander seed, 2 tablespoons whole fenugreek, 2 tablespoons whole cumin, 3 tablespoons ground turmeric, 1 teaspoon hot paprika, 1/2 teaspoon cayenne, 2 teaspoons sweet Hungarian paprika, 1/2 teaspoon black peppercorns, 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg and 3 to 4 slices fresh ginger in an electric coffee mill or food processor and grind or process until extremely fine.

In the processor, the coriander and fenugreek will not pulverize as well as other spices, so you should transfer everything to a mortar and pestle and pound them until powdered to a fine consistency. Your eye and nose should tell you if you have the right texture and proportions. It's a blend very comfortable to my palate, but you may want to increase the power of one or another spice—don't hesitate to do so. Although the mixture will hold its flavor if stored in a plastic bag in the freezer, it's better to use it right away. Adjust the proportions to your individual needs and there won't be any leftovers. It's marvelous in any dish that calls for curry powder, and a wonderful basis for a sauce for vegetables.

Aura of 2nd Ave.

A New York store with much the same stock as Haig's though more Central European in character, is Paprikas Weiss on 2nd Ave. Then there's another great food and equipment store on Prince St. in Soho—Dean & DeLuca. The collection of olive oils here is absolutely wonderful and the apricots from Turkey are among the best I've ever tasted. The breads, charcuterie, cheeses, vegetables and fruits are noteworthy of great quality and variety. It has become one of my favorite shopping places and I was delighted to hear that the owners, recognizing that many of Manhattan's most serious cooks move their kitchens to the Hamptons in summer are going to start another shop in East Hampton at 46 Newtown Lane, in a building that was the old post office. The shop is scheduled to open this spring and a truckload of fresh foods will go out from the city every day, a boon to serious shoppers who have found Long Island somewhat lacking in the amenities they are accustomed to in New York.

Shopping in places like this is a heady, exciting and stimulating experience that can bring the most surprising new things into your cooking life. Even if you are in a part of the country that doesn't have interesting shops where you can buy unusual things, there are some excellent books, notable "The Complete Food Catalogue," that will aid you in making the same kind of trip by mail. It's an easy way to broaden your food spectrum.

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